

Teacher Job Satisfaction in a Year-Round School

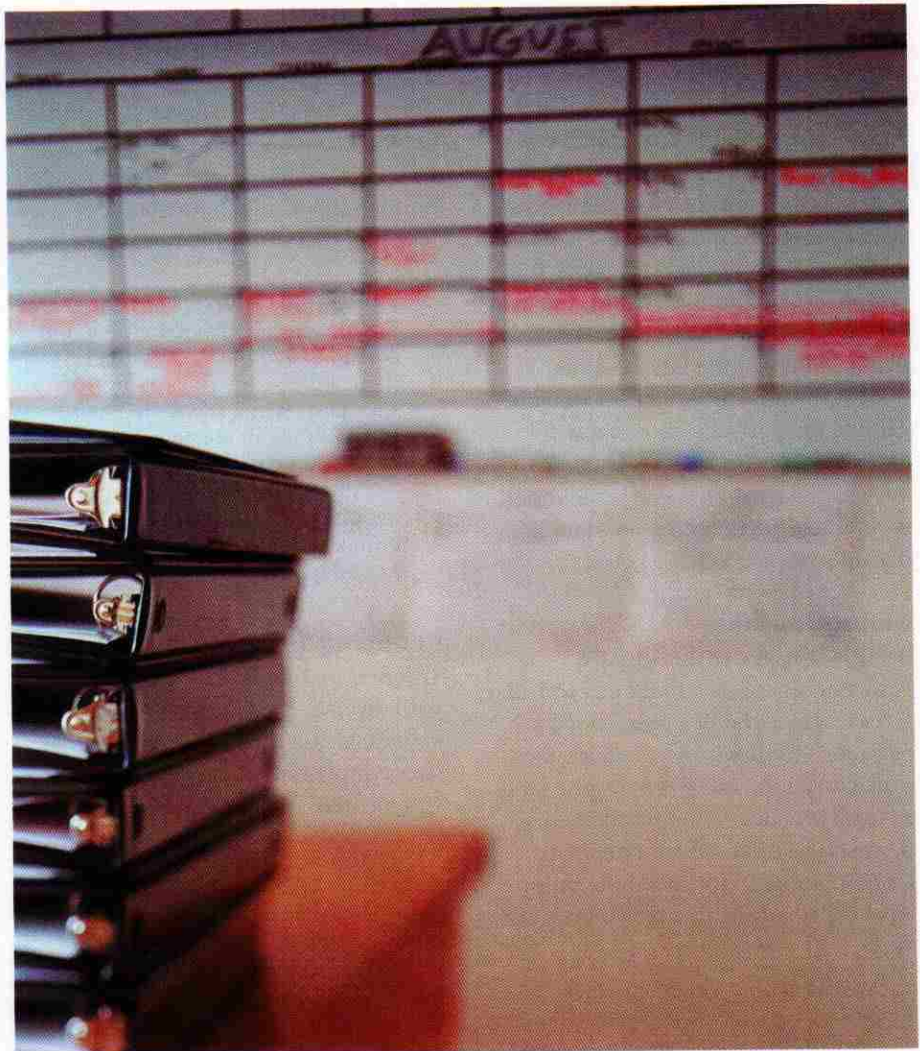
In the hands of flexible, supportive school administrators, the year-round calendar can promote teacher motivation and retention.

Shelly Gismondi Haser and Ilham Nasser

In 1998, Timber Lane Elementary School in Fairfax County, Virginia, changed from a regular school year calendar to a year-round schedule. The school's goal was to meet the needs of its students. The Title I school serves a richly diverse community; the student body represents dozens of countries. About 50 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Timber Lane teachers and administrators believed that the new calendar would especially benefit language-minority students by giving them more consistent, year-round exposure to English-language and content instruction.

In addition to its benefits for students and families, the new schedule has also had a positive impact on staff members. Unlike many other Title I schools in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, Timber Lane has few teacher vacancies. In fact, during one of our conversations with principal Anita Blain, we saw a large stack of teacher applications on her desk.

How does Timber Lane keep motivated, qualified, and tenured teachers when similar schools in the area suffer from the revolving-door syndrome—new teachers staying a year or two and then leaving? To find out, we spent



about six months observing and interviewing the school's teachers and administrators. We found that innovative, supportive school administrators combined with the flexible work opportunities and periodic breaks created by the year-round calendar are a powerful combination to improve teacher retention and job satisfaction.

Timber Lane's Year-Round Calendar

Timber Lane's school year begins during the first week of August and concludes during the last week of June, providing a four- to five-week summer break in July. Three two-week intersessions in October, January, and April augment the short summer vacation.

Students are not required to attend school during the intersessions, but many choose to do so. The diverse offerings range from such academic topics as "Math Magic" to such hobbies and sports as gardening, photography, and soccer. Students who attend the intersessions pay \$25 per class. Financial assistance is available for students who cannot afford the fee.

Timber Lane teachers also have the option to work during the intersessions. During our interviews, teachers said that teaching during intersessions offered them many benefits, including earning extra money, working with other students from different grades, and sharing a beloved skill or hobby without curriculum pressures and demands.

Giving Teachers a Flexible Work Schedule

Few schools are structured in a way that gives teachers the flexibility to work part-time. Timber Lane administrators realized that the intersessions provided an ideal avenue to offer teachers this professional option. Vice Principal Diane Connolly explained how Principal Blain and she first developed this idea:

We always try something once. . . . We try to be flexible. There were two Timber Lane teachers on mater-

nity leave who were interested in teaching during the intersession, and arrangements were made for them to share an intersession class and "keep in the loop."

The principal hopes that the professional options created by the intersessions will refresh and stimulate teachers who take time off for child care and give them a nudge to return to the classroom when they are ready to move

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back to a full-time job. Our discussions with teachers, including several on maternity leave from neighboring schools who taught Timber Lane intersession classes, supported this strategy. One intersession teacher from a neighboring school, who left full-time teaching two years ago, remarked,

I teach three intersessions a year and find the experience rewarding. I'm able to earn money, be with children, and use my skills as an ESL specialist. When I was pregnant, I thought about changing to a career in real estate while I stayed home, but the intersession teaching option has changed that. In another year, I think I'll be ready to go back to teaching full-time.

Reducing Teacher Stress

Teachers in Title I schools, who work with diverse, needy students, often experience high levels of professional stress throughout the year. One teacher commented,

On the traditional calendar, I was wiped out by April. To do a good job as a teacher took a lot out of me; I even thought of early retirement. Now, on the year-round education cycle, I get systematic breaks; the kids get breaks from me, and we're ready to work together again.

Diane Connolly has found that the year-round calendar decreases teacher absenteeism. She explained,

Because they get frequent breaks, teachers don't need to take off as many mental health days. Also, teachers try to schedule their doctors' appointments during intersessions, so they don't have to take leave, which comes back around to the kids' benefit. If teachers take fewer days off, they're in the classroom more, and more learning is most likely going on than with a substitute.

Teachers can also take advantage of off-season travel opportunities during the intersessions, such as visiting Italy in October.

Providing Time for Professional Reflection

One reason that Timber Lane adopted the year-round schedule was to give teachers more professional planning time—what Anita Blain calls "think time." If teachers in a Timber Lane grade team agree to meet together for a block of time during the intersession, they receive a stipend for curriculum planning and reflection. Blain explains that this encourages teachers

to get together and compare notes, plan, and talk about what lessons went really well and what needs to change.

Many Timber Lane teachers feel that the two-week intersession breaks occur just when they need to "step back" from the classroom. One teacher put it this way:

I have time during intersessions to just reflect about rearranging my classroom and tweaking classroom management.

Positive Impact of Year-Round Education

Nearly all of the Timber Lane teachers whom we interviewed had previously worked in schools that operated under a traditional calendar. These teachers could readily compare that system with the year-round school calendar. They

commented that the year-round schedule and intersessions gave them more professional choices and flexibility and increased their job satisfaction. A few teachers did experience problems with the year-round schedule because their own children attended schools on a traditional schedule. This challenge prompted several teachers to transfer to another school within the county. For the most part, however, teachers viewed the year-round schedule as an improvement in their working conditions.

Other research confirms that year-round education can have a positive impact on teachers, students, and parents. For example, Ballinger (2000) and Barber (1996) found that students' attendance and academic achievement at year-round schools improved; some studies suggest that this schedule may especially benefit at-risk students (Kneese, 1996; Shields & Oberg, 1999). Other research has found that year-round education can improve school climate, increase communication, foster innovation in teaching and learning, and reduce teacher stress and burnout (Campbell, 1994; Gandura, 1992; Nasser & Gismondi Haser, 2002; Shields & LaRocque, 1998).

Two studies that looked at psychological or nonacademic benefits for teachers in year-round schools found that teachers were highly satisfied with this schedule (Nasser & Gismondi Haser, 2002; Shields & Oberg, 1999). Teachers in these studies found that the breaks allowed personal and professional renewal, opportunity to reflect on their practice, and time to plan for the coming instructional period. Teachers also felt that the year-round schedule benefited their students because it eliminated the need to spend time reviewing chunks of learning lost over the summer months. Finally, one study found that teachers perceived the year-round calendar as more professional, giving them a better public image (Shields & Oberg, 1999).

At Timber Lane, we found that flexible, creative school administrators,

part-time employment possibilities, and intersessions or breaks spaced throughout the year have added up to a positive environment for teacher retention and job satisfaction. When other districts or schools consider the year-round education model to meet the needs of their students, they should know that this model has another potential benefit: Year-round education can help a school attract and retain top-notch teachers. ■

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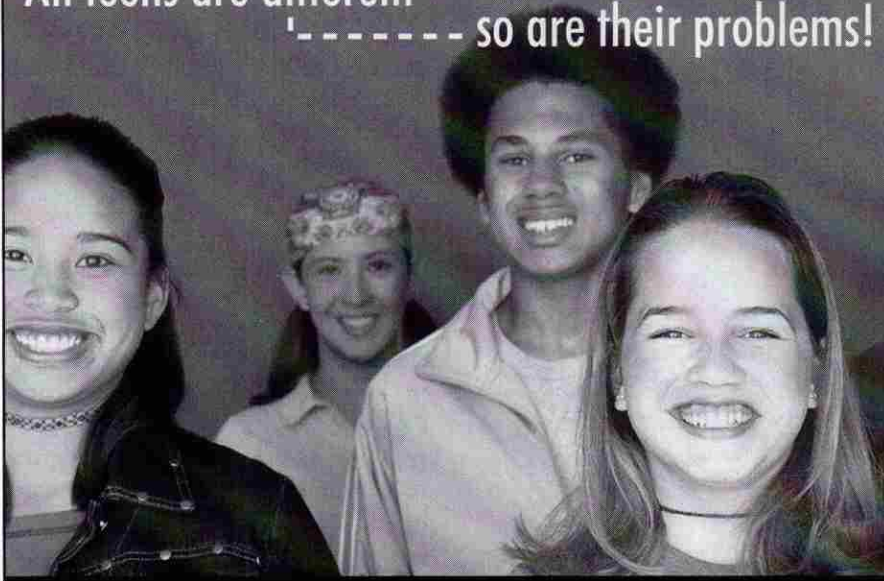
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